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EMBASSY OF THE
UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

Kabul, Afghanistan

December 29, 1970

Honorable Joseph J. Sisco
Assistant Secretary for Near Eastern
and South Asian Affairs
Department of State
Washington, D.C. 20520

Dear Joe:

Your good letter of November 27 arrived here on December 17, which is very slow for the classified pouch. It gave me a welcome opportunity to compose a little sooner my reflections on Afghanistan in 1970 which I had intended to do early in the new year. You and NEA/PAF have been kind and complimentary in recent messages and I am grateful.

But just as there was no reason to be disheartened during periods when little forward movement was discernible, so I would now wish to warn against over-optimism in the face of the King's recent and laudable activities. If I have learned anything in this part of the world I would put the following two lessons high on the list:

1. Things do not flow - they jerk. In the West one usually discerns some flow, or at least some activity which may logically be expected to produce action. In the East very often, especially in Afghanistan, nothing whatsoever seems to move but under the surface pressures of various kinds are built up and suddenly at some mysterious moment there is a sudden, spasmodic forward motion and then again nothing until the process starts again;

2. When something does happen and you line up all the reasons which might have brought this action about, the one most cogent and logical from a Western point of view is unlikely to be the true one. More likely something more oblique, more emotional, more prestige-ridden has been the cause of whatever action occurred.

Against this background let me now turn to the questions implied in your letter: Why does the King act when he acts? Why does he not act more often? I think that if one were to examine the King's priorities one would first have to mention stability, or to put it differently, political over economic development. And stability means to him among other things the constant and rather shrewd

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E.O. 12958, as amended
June 9, 2005

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I could not get them together

balancing of numerous forces in the country. The downfall of King Amanullah in 1929 has taught him and many Afghans that if the modernization process goes too fast and undermines the power basis, the interlocking family structures on which this country is based, everything may be in danger. Moreover, the area in which the King has by far the greatest knowledge and supreme skill, tribal relations, is the one in which he has learned and in which he practices to a fine point the art of balancing. Thus balancing the Pushtuns and the non-Pushtuns, the government people and the private entrepreneurs, the military and the civilian establishments, the various tribal groups, and last but not least the various branches of the Royal Family, is a constant and wily endeavor which can work only if things do not move too fast. Certainly it could be argued quite seriously that particularly outstanding and rapid economic progress could unbalance this system.

Now after nearly four years in this country I am also inclined to regard the "democratic experiment" as part of this balancing act rather than as a novel and revolutionary approach to government. It tends to atomize the political forces in this country further, gives real power to none but keeps everybody busy and puzzled, and thus deprives the opposition of an opportunity to organize in a really dangerous fashion. The left opposition is better organized and the right opposition is larger, but neither present a "clear and present danger" at this time, except this is less true of the left; it is organizing and making more use than any other group of the situation. Moreover the "democratic experiment", if successful, would also tend to add stability in case of the King's demise, always a dangerous moment in a Moslem country as the Islamic tradition tends to equate power with legitimacy.

When the King expresses reluctance, as he frequently has to me, to intervene too forcefully because, as he put it, "such intervention would deprive the democratic experiment of credibility" he is perhaps revealing only a part of the truth. In his mind, I suspect, any forceful assertion by anyone, including himself, is in danger of upsetting this complicated, delicate and very oriental system of balancing forces. For that reason also he may not have favored the cabinet's giving in too easily to the Parliament's hostility against Minister of Information and Culture Habibi, although a valuable part of the parliamentary session was lost in a useless deadlock. Possibly the widely rumored contention that Mrs. Habibi, a very attractive woman and announcer over Radio Afghanistan, is allegedly the King's mistress, could also have something to do with the way in which the King acted in this matter. Whatever it may have been worth, the Habibi affair was finally liquidated with a relative minimum loss of governmental prestige and was followed by the King's new drive for more legislation. No doubt he was aided in this by foreign

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PA/HO, Department of State
E.O. 12958, as amended
June 9, 2005

~~CONFIDENTIAL~~

3

press reports criticizing Parliament's inaction which the government has assiduously circulated.

I am increasingly inclined also to favor the interpretation that the King's choice of a weak prime minister is an important part of this balancing act. Perhaps also the King's memory of the authoritarian personality of Prince Daud plays a significant role. The first prime minister under the "Democratic Experiment", Dr. Youssef, was probably the ablest one. He was a qualified economist and may well have exerted too much leadership for the King's taste. This, rather than the students' unrest and the shooting of the Third of Akhrab, was probably responsible for Youssef's downfall. The next prime minister, Maiwandwal, endeavored to shore up his position by building his personal and political power, and that brought him into conflict first with the Parliament, and then with the King. And now there is Etemadi who leads nothing and nobody. An honest and honorable man - not a mean feature in these parts, he is a man of very limited imagination, ignorant of economic problems (and apparently determined to remain so), cautious to the nth degree, and yet unbending - thus combining the disadvantages of two opposite courses of action. And with the prime minister showing neither talent nor real drive for leadership, either within the country or toward Parliament, the other ministers are handicapped even if some of them had what it takes - and that is far from certain. And yet this may well be what the King wants.

Where, in my opinion, the King's approach falls considerably short is in his under-estimation of the speed with which economic stagnation, rising prices, and in particular growing unemployment among school graduates could destroy this delicate system of checks and balances. Or in other words, the King's analysis probably over-estimates the forces which he knows against those which he does not.

It is therefore necessary for us to press for speedier and more effective economic measures than a reluctant and inexperienced government, totally unsure of itself and of its relatively new institutions, is often courageous enough to take. At the same time, the King's balancing act also deserves understanding and a considerable measure of respect.

It seems to me that Afghanistan's progress and the American interest in Afghanistan must be measured in more complex and subtle terms than merely percentages of GNP. As you know very well the economist's sliderule is a very inadequate tool for measuring anything in the Near East and South Asia.

What is the American interest in Afghanistan and how might it best be served? We have stated in our NSC approved policy paper that our interest is that of strengthening Afghanistan's will to independence.

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DECLASSIFIED
PA/HO, Department of State
E.O. 12958, as amended
June 9, 2005

~~CONFIDENTIAL~~

4

This I think is more important in its negative aspect than its positive ones. Under the best of circumstances, a peaceful, reasonably balanced and stable Afghanistan will not add a great deal to the dubious stability of the region. But an unstable Afghanistan could have an exceedingly destabilizing effect because of the thousands of miles of virtually open frontier between Afghanistan and its eastern and western neighbors. An unstable, hostile Afghanistan could be an infectious cyst - a fact which is apparently much more seriously regarded by Iran's Shah who understands this very well than by the Pakistanis whose preoccupations point in another direction.

There is little doubt that the U.S. is part of the King's balancing act in foreign affairs. But in view of the geographic location of this country and the modesty of our resources I find this, by and large, to favor our interests. Because the Afghans want to be independent and therefore welcome our presence, our input has, on the whole, significant results.

But that means also that our tactics have to be very careful and flexible. To push too hard, to the extent that we might seriously upset the existing balances, could be counterproductive and undermine our position here. On the other hand, we have, I believe, a more realistic idea of the political dangers arising from an over-stagnant economy than the Afghans have and we must therefore press harder than perhaps we would like for more reforms, greater efficiency, better management and the rest. In this we are sometimes handicapped by our overly great permissiveness in past years when funds were plentiful, and the Afghans are therefore sometimes tempted to take us right down to the wire in the expectation that at the last minute the U.S. cavalry will rescue the fort from the redskins. This game of "chicken" sometimes requires strong nerves but fortunately there is nothing wrong with the nerves of this Mission and our problems, even at their worst, cannot even remotely compare to what you and your associates have to endure every day.

One further item which our tactics have to bear in mind constantly is the limited Afghan capability for managing several crises at the same time. Thus, in our efforts to obtain faster action which are often necessary and sometimes governed by Washington deadlines which are part of the reality of life, we must constantly guard against overloading the circuits lest we have a breakdown of Afghan morale and an overdose of Moslem fatalism. A good example for this tactical situation in many of its ramifications is the Shamalon project. For a while the witlessness of the governor and the irresolution of the government in Kabul seemed totally incapable of overcoming certain local resistance much of which was based on misinformation which the government did preciously little to counteract. Thus, despite many

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PA/HO, Department of State
E.O. 12958, as amended
June 9, 2005

~~CONFIDENTIAL~~

5

warnings on our part, little happened and we had to envisage the possibility of going up for a final determination in which we might well have been forced to let the loan go. Fortunately in one of those incomprehensible situations in which the above-mentioned "spasm" takes place, a new and vigorous governor who knew the region well was appointed, speedily went to work and as if by magic greatly changed the situation in the Helmand Valley to the better. Now there was no resistance left. But a great deal of time had been lost and we were up against the crucial amendment to the water law without which the governor's good efforts would have come to nought. By that time, however, the Parliament and the government were hopelessly deadlocked over the Habibi affair and no legislation could be expected.

Thus, although we kept pushing the government on this, there could be no realistic expectations for an amendment except by royal decree after the parliamentary session had come to an end. I therefore reserved my steam with the King until that moment would come although I realized that our time was getting preciously short. Then, however, the King did act to get the Parliament to move and prolonged the legislative session after the Habibi affair was liquidated. This, of course, changed the tactical situation and I went immediately to work on the King, as you know from my telegrams. As these lines are being dictated, we seem to be making progress but it is still not certain that this Parliament can take the additional load of the water law amendment, although there is no real resistance to it. In that case, however, we think we have a way out by way of a royal decree covering at least that portion of the amendment which is vitally necessary to permit the governor and ourselves to go ahead. This, however, may take us right up to the wire again but this is life in this mountain kingdom and I hope that I may count on your and everybody else's understanding of what we are doing and why.

In our endeavors to keep alive here what it still to me an astonishingly significant and strong American influence in the face of overwhelming Soviet presence and input we must nevertheless take note of the fact that the Russians have become more aggressive, are much better led by their new and very able Ambassador Kiktev, and are fully exploiting Afghan weakness and irresolution which present them with targets of opportunity. I do not see the Russian activity increasing in such a dramatic form as to make me believe in the imminence of forceful Soviet intervention and I would not see for what reason they would want to do so. But I believe that reasonably tolerable Soviet good behavior and self-restraint can be expected to

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DECLASSIFIED
PA/HO, Department of State
E.O. 12958, as amended
June 9, 2005

~~CONFIDENTIAL~~

6

continue only if the Afghans become economically stronger and more self-reliant and as long as the American presence remains a significant reality. We have, therefore, quite a job on our hands.

To do this job in the best interest of our policy I do not believe that we need greatly increased budgets, even if it were possible to obtain them. As far as our USAID program is concerned our present levels are quite satisfactory although we are rethinking now certain priorities and a certain shifting of emphasis as well as consolidation of effort. On this I shall write separately in the not too distant future. There are, however, three areas in which we could and should do more:

1. One, though a very restricted one, is that of our military assistance program which as you know consists of a small number of training slots in the United States. I think the time is ripe now for a modest and quiet increase. I believe this is understood in the Pentagon and I feel confident that we could find understanding for an attempt to add a couple of training slots, especially in staff and command college training. I want to underline, however, that I am thinking of very small and gradual increases and that I fully agree that anything more abrupt or dramatic would be destabilizing and counterproductive.

2. The other field where we should be doing more is in public affairs. Our small USIS unit is doing a tremendous job under the most able leadership of Peter Brescia, PAO, but it is so small that it cannot fully exploit the very real opportunities which we have here. I fully appreciate the limits of budgeting and world-wide restraints but I believe that the two above mentioned areas, MAP and USIS, are those in which our small program pays off big dividends and where small increases could certainly be justified.

3. Finally there is my ever-present endeavor to counterbalance by optical counter-reaction the Afghan fear of American disinterest or withdrawal, and by "optical" I mean high-level official visits. I am certainly not complaining. I am deeply gratified by the fact that it was during my tenure here that both the Vice President and the Secretary of State were able to visit us. We were of course disappointed to learn that you and the Under Secretary will not be able to visit us at this time (State 186160) but we certainly understand your scheduling problems. (What does Kathmandu have that we do not have - besides Carol Laise?)

But now, in view of the really very energetic Soviet push, the innumerable visits between the two countries, the far more aggressive Soviet stance in all areas, I feel keenly that yet another significant

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PA/HO, Department of State
E.O. 12958, as amended
June 9, 2005

~~CONFIDENTIAL~~

7

counter-move from our side is required. Therefore it is my very strong and considered feeling that the times are uniquely right for the long discussed and much-postponed official trip by Their Majesties to the United States. You were good enough to refer to this in your letter and while I fully realize the many difficulties I want you to understand strongly the high priority, from our point of view, that should be given to such a visit now. The optimum time would by all odds be late winter or early spring, preferably before the new session of Parliament reassembles in mid-March (they actually do not get down to business before the beginning of April). A very real extra dividend would also come to us if the King's visit were somehow to coincide with the next moon shot, not only because of the King's very great interest in space technology (and his not-inconsiderable knowledge on that subject but also because it would make it easier for us to play up, in connection with the publicity surrounding the King's visit, America's technological progress. But I do not know the schedule of the moon shots so this may not be possible.

I realize this gives you little time. But I do believe that we have a real target of opportunity here, and that the King's increased activities make the timing exceedingly right. Please let me hear about this soon.

Best wishes for much success in the New Year.

Sincerely,



Robert G. Neumann

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